

Łukasz A. Plesnar  
Jagiellonian University

## Clint Eastwoods's *Letters from Iwo Jima* as a transnational film

### Abstract:

We may consider *Letters from Iwo Jima* as a typical transnational film. Its concept is based on Eastwood's discovery of a General Kuribayashi's book of letters and drawings, Picture Letters from Commander in Chief, collected and translated into English by Tsuyuko Yoshida (the original title: Gyokusa soshikikan no etegami). The script for Letters was written by a Japanese-American writer, Iris Yamashita, and Paul Haggis, Eastwood's previous scripter. Despite having been produced by American companies (DreamWorks Pictures, Warner Bros Company, Malpaso Productions, and Ambling Entertainment), almost entire movie is in Japan.

The film functions as the second panel of the war diptych, being a twin to *Flags of Our Fathers*. Both movies depict the battle of Iwo Jima, but from the different perspectives: *Flags* from the American point of view, and the *Letters* from the Japanese one. Shooting his diptych, Eastwood decided to "show the two sides of a battle", presenting the consequences of war on both sides. It was a feat that had never been attempted by any other filmmaker (except perhaps Lewis Milestone in *All Quiet on the Western Front*). Eastwood refutes the decades when the Americans demonized the Japanese, which began at the start of the war on Pacific. The director portrays the Japanese soldiers as "young and powerless and driven to madness or suicide" human beings, who are to be pitied, not hated. He tries to escape from stereotypical images of the Japanese society, Japanese soldiers, and Japanese culture, often presented in the American cinema. Main roles are cast with the Japanese while in the earlier Hollywood movies Japanese characters were generally performed by Chinese-Americans or Asian-Americans). This makes the film more authentic.

*Letters* was released in Japan and was commercially successful, receiving warm reception from critics and audiences. An English-dubbed version came out sixteen months after its Japanese premiere.

**Key words:** transnational film, war movies, combat movies, representation, stereotypes, suicide, Japan, Clint Eastwood

*Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, two movies produced by Clint Eastwood in 2006, are atypical and unusual works. “It was the first time a director made two films at the same time about the same event, which here is the battle over Iwo Jima in 1945”.<sup>1</sup> According to historians, this was one of the deadliest fights in the Pacific Campaign. Over the course of 36 days in February and March, the invasion forces of 110,000 Marines fought 22,000 entrenched Japanese infantrymen. Only 1,083 Japanese survived, while 6,821 Americans were killed and almost 20,000 wounded. The Imperial Army troops were commanded by General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, “a unique man, a man of great imagination, creativity and resourcefulness”<sup>2</sup>, a soldier who went far beyond the traditional model of a Japanese officer, and who is one of the main characters of *Letters from Iwo Jima*.

Originally, Eastwood planned to make one film devoted to the battle of Iwo Jima: an adaptation of James Bradley’s book about six Marines raising the American flag on Mount Suribachi. However, while the director was working on *Flags of Our Fathers*, he discovered General Tadamichi Kuribayashi’s book of letters and drawings, *Picture Letters from Commander in Chief*, which had been published posthumously in Japanese in 1992 and then translated into English by Tsuyuko Yoshida.<sup>3</sup> It contained the General’s letters to his wife and children, including those written on Iwo Jima. “In the letters Eastwood found a Japanese voice”, Rikke Schubart writes. “He first considered adding a Japanese point of view to *Flags*, but then decided on making a second film instead. A film entirely dedicated to the Japanese point of view. And so, while doing post-production on *Flags*, Eastwood shot *Letters from Iwo Jima* in 32 days”.<sup>4</sup> Both *Flags* and *Letters* are independent movies, but at the same time, as Leo Braudy notes, “both are tremendously enriched by their juxtaposition and should be seen as a diptych”.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from many similarities, we can also notice numerous differences between *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Firstly, *Flags* was shot in English with American actors, while *Letters*, despite having been produced by American companies (DreamWorks Pictures, Warner Bros Company, Malpaso Productions, and Ambling Entertainment), was kept in Japanese and engaged Japanese actors. Secondly, *Flags* was a 75 million dollar blockbuster movie, while *Letters* cost only 15 million dollars. Thirdly, *Flags* was originally aimed at an

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<sup>1</sup> Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik, “Introduction: Know Your Enemy, Know Yourself” [in:] Rikke Schubart & Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Eastwood’s Iwo Jima. Critical Engagements with ‘Flags of Our Fathers’ and ‘Letter from Iwo Jima’* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Eastwood quoted from the press material for the film *Letters from Iwo Jima*, “Letters from Iwo Jima Production Information”, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Another book that influenced and inspired Eastwood was Kumiko Kakekashi’s *Letters from Iwo Jima* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), originally published as *Chipuzo Kanashiki* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Rikke Schubart, “Eastwood and the Enemy” [in:] Rikke Schubart & Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Eastwood’s Iwo Jima. Critical Engagements with ‘Flags of Our Fathers’ and ‘Letter from Iwo Jima’*, p. 174.

<sup>5</sup> Leo Braudy, “Flags of Our Fathers / Letters of Iwo Jima”, *Film Quarterly*; Summer 2007; 60, 4; p. 17.

international audience, while *Letters* was directed above all at Japanese moviegoers. It is significant that an English-dubbed version of the film came out sixteen months after its Japanese premiere. The participation of Japanese actors speaking subtitled dialogue led to certain confusions. American spectators regarded the movie as a Japanese production. On the other hand, *Letters* won the Japanese Academy Award for the best foreign language film, which was an obvious paradox.

Differences between both Eastwood's movies are not limited to the aspect of production, but go much further, referring also to the content. We could say, quoting the statement of Aaron Gerow, that *Flags* is "about how to remember the war, giving a new view on an incident everyone knows", while *Letters* is "about listening to those who fought it, trying to create a memory tableau of something most people, including the Japanese, know little about". *Flags* is also an attempt to deconstruct the Hollywood genre of war and combat films, while *Letters* "appears more simply as an American effort to understand the complex human beings on the other side, to tell the world that they were brave too".<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the circumstances of the production process, we can list three reasons why *Letters from Iwo Jima* should be recognized as a transnational film: 1) adoption by the director of a Japanese point of view; 2) portrayal of Japanese soldiers—against the tradition of American war films—as simple, normal people, not as barbarians or even bloodthirsty wild beasts; 3) setting up the audience's identification with some of the young soldiers by focusing on their individual stories and their unfolding relations.<sup>7</sup>

We may say that the way Eastwood builds the plot of *Letters*, describes its characters, and defines their motives leads him to the denial of a number of stereotypes that exist in American culture. Although these stereotypes primary refer to images of an enemy, they also relate indirectly to images of every „other“, whether racial or national. Nonetheless, the director is famous for the blunt attitude towards such stereotypes that he has demonstrated a number of times. He fought against the stereotype of a Native American as a tomahawk-wielding savage thirsty for the white man's blood and living in the wilderness or on reservations (men) and a beautiful maiden (women) in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976). He questioned various stereotypes of Afro Americans (as thugs, domestic workers, or a best friend of a white man) in *Bird* (1988) and that of an African as a naked black guy brandishing spears and fighting with their neighbours in *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1990). Finally, he waged a war with the stereotypes of Hispanic American women as maids, sexpots, or immigrants in *Blood Work* (2002) as well as with the stereotypes of Asian Americans as kung fu fighters or a technical experts (men) and prostitutes (women) in *Gran Torino* (2008).

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<sup>6</sup> Aaron Gerow, "From 'Flags of Our Fathers' to 'Letters from Iwo Jima': Clint Eastwood's Balancing of Japanese and American Perspective", online: <http://apjjf.org/-Aaron-Gerow/2290/article.html> (accessed 26 July, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> See Sara Anson Vaux, *The Ethical Vision of Clint Eastwood* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), p. 157.

The majority of stereotypes are of national nature in two senses of the word. Firstly, they frequently come into existence and are formed within a group we call a nation. Secondly, they often refer to nations. Obviously, stereotypes differ according to both their subjects and objects (for instance, Poles have quite different stereotypes of Russians than do Serbians<sup>8</sup>, just as Jews see Palestinians completely unlike Egyptians or Saudi Arabians). I want to stress that stereotypes might sometimes be modified over the course of time, but usually they are relatively stable.

Cinema is a domain where stereotypes occur very often. We may even say that the history of film is the history of disseminating stereotypes. Rejection of national and racial stereotypes is not so easy when you consider viewers' expectations and their cultural training as well as a filmmaker himself being trapped in the stereotype network of his own culture. However, success means something special: the transition from the sphere of national to the sphere of transnational. To paraphrase the words of Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, we may say that the key to transnationalism is the recognition of the decline of national stereotypes as a regulatory force in global cinema.<sup>9</sup>

I have already mentioned the extremely stereotypical images of the Japanese in the American films produced during World War II. This subject will be discussed in more detail in a later part of this study. However, it is interesting whether the images of Americans and other enemies of the Empire were equally stereotypical in the Japanese films from the same period. The answer is surprising: no. Japanese films, including war and combat movies, rarely presented or even mentioned the enemy; battles were often filmed simply from the Japanese side, showing no opposing soldiers. Even the leading propaganda movie, Kajirō Yamamoto's *The War at Sea from Hawaii to Malay* (*Hawai Marē oki kaisen*, 1942)—made to commemorate the first anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor—paid little attention to the Americans. The main reason seems to be simple: "Japanese racism was less concerned with the denigration of others than with the elevation of themselves, with affirming their status as an allegedly superior and chosen people".<sup>10</sup> As a result, on-screen Japanese soldiers were depicted as living in an exclusive world of camaraderie and racial affinity. Images of enemies were needless.

Obviously, this was not the absolute rule. A number of *jidaigeki* movies stirred up "a passionate hatred among the populace against Japan's 'historic enemy'

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<sup>8</sup> The Poles consider the Russians to be the threatening barbarians, as „Asians” who want to conquer Poland and the whole Europe, as the rude, backward, conceited and always dead-drunk nationalists, poor and with no future before them. Meanwhile, the Serbs perceive Russians as the Slav brothers and the close friends.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, „General Introduction: What is Transnational Cinema? [in:] Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (eds.), *Transnational Cinema. The Film Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), s. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Freda Freiberg, „China Nights (Japan, 1940): The Sustaining Romance” [in:] John Whiteclay Chambers II, David Culbert (eds.), *World War II, Film, and History* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 34.

(*shukuteki*), the Anglo-Saxon powers”<sup>11</sup>. Some films, for instance Tomotaka Tasaka's *Mud and Soldiers* (*Tsuchi to heitai* – 1939) and Yoshimura Kōzaburō's *The Legend of Tank Commander Nishizumi* (*Nishizumi senshachō den* – 1940), presented the “inhuman” qualities of the Chinese, and Imai Tadashi's *Suicide Troops of the Watchtower* (*Bōrō no kesshitai* – 1943) depicted the Korean communist guerrillas as bloodthirsty beasts (though the image of “normal” Koreans was relatively positive).

Paradoxically, the most negative image of American soldiers, politicians and culture can be found in Taku Shinjō's *For Those We Love* (*Ore wa, kimi no tame ni koso shini ni iku* – 2007), a quite recent production about the kamikaze pilots of World War II. The movie has triggered many controversies in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand as it portrayed pilots' suicides as courageous and honourable, whereas the Allied forces, the victims of their attacks, were shown as brutal aggressors with no honour or sense of duty.

Let us return to *Letters from Iwo Jima*. The “soul” of Eastwood's film and one of its main figures is the baker-turned-soldier, Private Saigo (played by pop star Kazunari Ninomiya), who has promised his young pregnant wife not to kill himself, to return home alive, and to never fire a shot. His name is symbolic, as it means “the last” in Japanese. Indeed, he is the only Japanese character who has survived the bloody slaughter on Iwo Jima. Saigo is not only a Japanese baker or soldier, but also an “everyman”, one of us, somebody who loves his family and profession, thinks about his future, and primarily wants to live. He cannot adapt to military life, he does not accept the callousness of the Japanese army based on a strict hierarchy and the absolute obedience of soldiers, and he cowers under the stare of fanatic and indoctrinated officers. He feels the absurdity of being forced into a battle in which “only death awaits”.<sup>12</sup> Ikui Eikoh notices that “a hero like Saigo is exceptional less in Japanese history than in the history of Japanese film”<sup>13</sup>, because he is weak, frightened, defenceless, and lost, or using the words of Lars-Martin Sorensen because “he is ... normal”.<sup>14</sup>

Saigo is not the only “normal”, unheroic, and rational Japanese soldier in *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Private Nozaki (Yuki Matzusaki), accused of treason by an over-zealous officer, and Private Shimizu (Kase Ryo) are other ones. They, as Saigo, fight the rules and customs common in the Imperial Army: absolute hierarchy, ruthless obedience, and fanaticism inspired by the highest command. In one of the few scenes in the film that take place in Japan, we see a military police officer (Kempeitai) who orders Shimizu, a young recruit, to shoot a child's pet dog as a

<sup>11</sup> Peter B. High, *The Imperial Screen. Japanese Film Culture in the Fifteen Years' War, 1931-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), s. 421.

<sup>12</sup> Ikui Eikoh, „Letters from Iwo Jima: Japanese Perspectives”, *Japan Focus*, 2, online: <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Ikui-Eikoh/2417> (accessed 28 July, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> Lars-Martin Sorensen, “East of Eastwood. Iwo Jima and the Japanese Context” [in:] Rikke Schubart & Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Eastwood's Iwo Jima. Critical Engagements with 'Flags of Our Fathers' and 'Letter from Iwo Jima'*, p. 210.

test of his toughness and loyalty. When Shimizu tries to save the dog, he is dismissed and sent to Iwo Jima to face inevitable death. There his comrades accuse him—unjustly, of course—of being a Kempeitai informer. Fortunately, a conversation with Saigo clears up the misunderstanding. Both soldiers notice they have very similar opinions and attitudes. They consider the war in the name of the Emperor and abstract ideas of love of the country, honour, and imperial patriotism absurd. They also feel that they are too young to lay down their lives in a doomed war. They refused to commit suicide (after the others in their platoon had all killed themselves) and decided to surrender to the Americans. Shimizu goes first but is killed by two American guards. Saigo fails to move and preserves his life.

The killing of Shimizu by American guards reverses elementary Hollywood conventions of combat films: U.S. Marines, usually presented as good guys, perpetrate a crime on a Japanese soldier, shown usually as a bad guy. This murder is committed for no apparent reason, in fear of Shimizu and the reputation of the Imperial Army. The crime makes no sense: it is a savage and purposeless act that was most often attributed to the enemies of America in Hollywood movies. Therefore, Eastwood eventually overturns repartition of values: U.S. Marines are bad guys while Shimizu turns out to be a good guy.

Shimizu has bad luck. On the contrary, Saigo is lucky. Late in the film, Saigo and other Japanese soldiers are told by their commanding officers to defend Mount Suribachi with their lives. Desperate and distraught men begin committing suicide. However, Saigo refuses to kill himself, escapes the mountains, and goes to the base of operations where he meets General Kuribayashi. The General orders Saigo to burn all the documents whilst he leads the surviving soldiers for one final nighttime attack on the American troops. Saigo, fulfilling the order, burns the military documents and buries the pouch containing thousands of letters written by the soldiers and never delivered to Japan. In the bloody assault, Kuribayashi is fatally wounded and asks Saigo for a last favour: to bury him where he would not be found. In the closing shot of *Letters*, we see Saigo, captured by the U.S. forces, lying amongst many wounded American soldiers. His face is turned toward the camera. As Rikke Schubart writes, “This man—no hero, no saviour, no decorated corpsman or admired general—survives. He is the future, not to honour or mourn, but to emulate. He returns to his wife and child”.<sup>15</sup>

This scene also contains another message reconstructed by Ian Buruma: “Lying under his army blanket”, he notes, “waiting to be taken off the island of death, Saigo is no different from the Americans lined up beside him, and yet it is unmistakably him; and that is the point of Eastwood’s remarkable movie”.<sup>16</sup> This construction can be, and in fact should be, easily extended. It seems to me that the director makes it clear that all national, ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious

<sup>15</sup> Rikke Schubart, “Eastwood and the Enemy” [in:] Rikke Schubart & Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Eastwood’s Iwo Jima. Critical Engagements with ‘Flags of Our Fathers’ and ‘Letter from Iwo Jima’*, p. 189.

<sup>16</sup> Ian Buruma, “Eastwood War: The Battle of Iwo Jima”, *Japan Focus*, 5, online: <http://www.apjff.org/-Ian-Buruma/2360/article.html> (accessed 28 July, 2016).

distinctions are not important because in fact we are all alike. Alternatively, in other words, differences between people do not depend on national, ethnic, cultural, and religious factors. As Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg sums up: "Eastwood seems to suggest, we are all simple human beings endowed neither with the sadistic urge to kill nor with a fervent desire to fight for some abstract notion of 'love of country'".<sup>17</sup>

However, Zangenberg in his generalization takes things too far because in *Letters* Eastwood portrays not only "simple human beings", but also soldiers and civilians brainwashed by the military government and the tradition of the *bushido* code. Lieutenant Ito (Shido Nakamura) is a good example. He is obsessed with driving his men to honour suicide; ironically, he fails to kill himself and is imprisoned by U.S. Marines. In addition, many other officers, educated in strict military discipline and samurai tradition, are soulless, cruel, and ignorant, and seem more concerned with achieving a glorious suicidal death than defending Iwo Jima. Some of the civilians are indoctrinated too. When Saigo is conscripted into the Imperial Army, his neighbours and friends keep congratulating him and repeating that he is lucky to be chosen to die for his country.

Eastwood presents the problem of indoctrination as a conflict between simple soldiers and officers. While the soldiers are primarily concerned with survival and comradeship among themselves, the officers are caught in the trap of ideological thinking in terms of patriotism, honour, self-sacrifice, and fate. Nevertheless, not all of them are fully incapacitated by ideology, upbringing, and traditional samurai code. The director shows two senior officers who are exceptional: General Tademichi Kuribayashi and Colonel Baron Takeichi Nishi (Tsuyoshi Ihara).

General Kuribayashi left his post as head of the Emperor's Palace Guard "to lead what would turn out to be the suicidal defence of Iwo Jima, with all naval air support withdrawn".<sup>18</sup> After he arrived at the island, he deviated from traditional Japanese war strategy that "dictates that an island should be defended by pillboxes on the beaches".<sup>19</sup> Instead, he ordered his men to hew in the rocks of Mount Suribachi 28 kilometres of tunnels and 5,000 caves, which turned the Japanese infantry positions into nearly impregnable fortress. As a human being, Kuribayashi was a caring person. He protected his men against abusive officers, ordered equal food rations for officers and simple soldiers, and shared his water. Besides, he had the best qualities of the real warrior: he was tough, manly, courteous, and good-looking.

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<sup>17</sup> Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg, „Humanism versus Patriotism? Eastwood Trapped in the Bi-Polar Logic of Warfare" [in:] Rikke Schubart & Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Eastwood's Iwo Jima. Critical Engagements with 'Flags of Our Fathers' and 'Letter from Iwo Jima'*, p. 220.

<sup>18</sup> Leo Braudy, "Flags of Our Fathers / Letters of Iwo Jima", *Film Quarterly*, Summer 2007; 60, 4; p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Rikke Schubart, "Eastwood and the Enemy" [in:] Rikke Schubart & Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Eastwood's Iwo Jima. Critical Engagements with 'Flags of Our Fathers' and 'Letter from Iwo Jima'*, p. 182.



Kuribayashi is a cosmopolitan figure. He knows the United States well because he spent five years there as a military attaché. He likes this country, has American friends, and respects American values and the American way of life. One flashback shows his memory of a banquet dinner held in his honour at Fort Bliss in the late 1920s. Sitting in the dark cave on Iwo Jima, he recalls the moment when an American officer presents him with a Colt .45 “as a token of friendship”. Rikke Schubart writes, “We understand this is a *painful memory of a happy moment*. Kuribayashi treasures the gun, which he wears in his belt and with which he will commit suicide. Now, 54 years old, time is testing him. The commander’s conflict is obvious to us, torn as he is between his own convictions and those of his nation. Because, alas, they are *not* the same”.<sup>20</sup> The General “is no longer an enemy. Having travelled back in time and into his thoughts, we feel that we know him and that he is now a fellow being”.<sup>21</sup>

Besides Saigo, Kuribayashi is the main character of *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Both are similar in a way; but at the same time, both are quite different. They experience internal conflict between the demands of the intrusive rationality of war (survival above all else) and the cultural obligation to die for the country and the Emperor. However, they choose different solutions. Saigo decides on life, homecoming, and meeting his newborn daughter. The General, on the other hand, chooses honour death. When he recognizes the situation of his soldiers as hopeless, he orders the general attack on the American lines telling his men to be proud to die for their homeland. Then he takes his sword and leads his soldiers on the last charge.

Kuribayashi is fatally wounded during the assault and he orders his aide-de-camp to behead him with his sword, but the lieutenant is shot before the blow. Because of his injuries, Kuribayashi cannot hold his sword, so he uses the gun. “Ironically, the American gift of friendship leads to Japanese suicide”.<sup>22</sup>

The Colt .45 as a tool of suicide is a symbolic requisite. On the one hand, it represents American mythology and violence (as a well-known object of the history of the United States and many cultural texts, for example numerous literary or cinematographic Westerns); on the other hand it symbolizes friendship, honour, valour, pride, and politeness (as a gift). Nevertheless, it also symbolizes death, war, destruction, and self-destruction (as a weapon). For Kuribayashi it is an important bond with his happy past, days of peace, a time of innocence. It is also a tool of suicide that differs from the traditional Japanese tool used for that purpose. We may say that the gun is an object in which elements of the American and Japanese cultures meet. Maybe, more precisely, it is an agent of westernisation of Japanese culture.

Kuribayashi is not the only character in *Letters from Iwo Jima* with any personal knowledge of America and Americans: Colonel Baron Takeichi Nishi is another.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 184.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 185.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 185.



He is an aristocrat and an equestrian who had won the gold medal in the individual jumping event of the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles. As a well-known and rich man, he entertained Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, the famous actors of the era, at his home. His attitude to an enemy does not resemble traditional Japanese customs. Instead of killing a wounded young U.S. Marine soldier, Sam (Lucas Elliot Eberl), Nishi treats him with the last dose of morphine and reminisces about happy old days and his Hollywood friends. After the GI dies from his injuries, Nishi reads out a letter from the boy's mother, "Remember what I said to you: always do what is right because it is right". The letter enlightens Japanese soldiers that the Americans were just like them. Later despite *bushido* code and opinions of other officers, Nishi orders his infantry men not to commit suicide.

The Colonel seems to be even more cosmopolitan than Kuribayashi. He was a ladies' man, attracted to the glamour of society life. As Ian Buruma writes, "Nishi has the hearty manners of a sporting Englishman. He is rather like the Erich von Stroheim character in Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*, a member of the international aristocracy, in home in any place where wine, horses, and women have an acceptable pedigree".<sup>23</sup> However, when Nishi is blinded by an explosion and unable to lead his soldiers, he commits suicide. His cosmopolitanism turned out to be a coat covering deeply hidden nationalism. I think this way because I agree with Rikke Schubart, who notes, "*Letters* makes it crystal clear that suicide is a perverted nationalism".<sup>24</sup> This means that Kuribayashi was a kind of nationalist too. Or rather, he was loyal to the national ethos he did not share, but obeyed. In his last message to the Imperial Headquarters, he wrote, "Our ammunition is gone and our water dried up. Now is the time for us to make the final counterattack and fight gallantly, conscious of the Emperor's favour, not begrudging our efforts though they turn our bones to powder and pulverize our bodies. I believe that until the island is recaptured, the Emperor's domain will be eternally insecure. I therefore swear that even when I have become a ghost I shall look forward to turning the defeat of the Imperial Army to victory. I stand now at the beginning of the end. At the same time as revealing my innermost feelings, I pray earnestly for the unfailing victory and security of the Empire. Farewell for all eternity".<sup>25</sup>

General Kuribayashi and Colonel Nishi are the tragic heroes in an Aristotelian sense of the term. Firstly, they face the insoluble conflict. As we already know, this is a conflict between the rationality of war and a cultural or ideological obligation to die for the country and the Emperor. Kuribayashi and Nishi have Free Will, so they can choose. Each choice, however, leads to suffering and disaster. To choose survival means to be disloyal to military oath, to the Emperor, to the State, and to the Japanese tradition, and eventually to lose

<sup>23</sup> Ian Buruma, "Eastwood War: The Battle of Iwo Jima", *Japan Focus*.

<sup>24</sup> Rikke Schubart, "Eastwood and the Enemy" [in:] Rikke Schubart & Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Eastwood's Iwo Jima. Critical Engagements with 'Flags of Our Fathers' and 'Letter from Iwo Jima'*, p. 189.

<sup>25</sup> *Tadamichi Kuribayashi*, online: [http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Tadamichi\\_Kuribayashi](http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Tadamichi_Kuribayashi) (accessed 4 August, 2016).

everything that is of great worth: face, honour, respect, and a place in history. On the other hand, to choose self-sacrifice means to lose life on earth, worldly possessions, family, happiness, and future; in other words, everything that a human being knows empirically. Every choice is wrong. The tragic hero is a victim and a culprit at the same time. He is guilty of so-called *hamartia*, meaning that he has made a bad decision or miscalculation because of “poor reasoning” or an external stimulus (e.g. interventions of Gods or divine madness in ancient tragedy). I enclose the expression *poor reasoning* in quotation marks because a tragic hero, *ex definitione*, does not use “proper reasoning”; his reasoning is always poor. It results from circumstances and limited knowledge of human beings. A typical tragic hero makes a bad decision because he sees only one way. For instance, many Japanese infantrymen on Iwo Jima chose death over surrender because, as Robert S. Burrell writes, “most soldiers believed Americans massacred and tortured prisoners. In particular, the Japanese were taught to despise Marines, who purportedly had to murder their own parents to qualify for enlistment”.<sup>26</sup> However, Kuribayashi and Nishi were broadminded men with extensive knowledge partly based on their personal experiences. That is why they were double guilty of *hamartia* and thus double tragic; they must have seen more than one way out.

By building the figures of Kuribayashi and Nishi as tragic heroes, Eastwood precludes our privilege of judging their proceedings in terms of right and wrong. Certainly, it does not mean that they do not participate in the Manichean conflict between good and evil: it only means that their individual decisions do not influence the ultimate result of that eternal struggle, as it must continue until the end of our world. Kuribayashi and Nishi are only insignificant puppets in the theatre of life. They are fated to fail; in other words, they have to die.

Nevertheless, the character of Kuribayashi seems to be somewhat internally contradictory. Initially, he forbids his soldiers to use *banzai* charges and counterattacks, but at the end of the film, he leads his men to a suicidal assault on American lines. He likes and understands Americans. During the ceremonial banquet dinner at Fort Blass he says, “The United States is the last country in the world Japan should fight”. However, on Iwo Jima he writes the following order to his men: “Each of your shots must kill many Americans. We cannot allow ourselves to be captured by the enemy. If our positions are overrun, we will take bombs and grenades and throw ourselves under the tanks to destroy them. We will infiltrate the enemy lines to exterminate them. No man must die until he has killed at least ten Americans. We will harass the enemy with guerrilla actions until the last of us has perished”.<sup>27</sup>

Eastwood does not question Kuribayashi’s command. “He shows the despair of some of the Japanese soldiers who are ordered to die, admittedly, but he

<sup>26</sup> Robert S. Burrell, *The Ghost of Iwo Jima* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), p. 47.

<sup>27</sup> *Tadamichi Kuribayashi*, online: [http://ww2db.com/person\\_bio.php?person\\_id=21](http://ww2db.com/person_bio.php?person_id=21) (accessed 5 September 2016).

does not critically engage Kuribayashi's orders to die defending the island, or his heroic character for that matter".<sup>28</sup>

Aaron Gerow wonders whether Eastwood, in honouring soldiers like Kuribayashi, "may be unwittingly engaging in the same process of creating 'heroes' that *Flags of Our Fathers* criticized, albeit for another country".<sup>29</sup> This is even truer because the practice of honour suicide in form of *seppuku* or *banzai* seems to be Eastwood's most important tool to humanize Japanese characters. That praxis is also, as Robert Burgoyne notes, "the key to the film's tragic tone and the act that carries the strongest anti-war charge".<sup>30</sup> The author notices that Eastwood does not depict self-sacrifice "as a weapon, a tactic or strategy of war", but rather "as a means of bearing witness to a cause".<sup>31</sup> Such treatment of self-destruction is nothing new: Ancient Romans used it as a means of protest; ancient Israelites as a message to their contemporaries and descendants that Jews would never be "servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God Himself"<sup>32</sup>; early Christian martyrs as a way to follow in Jesus' footsteps; and present-day Buddhist monks in Tibet as a call of protest against Chinese occupation. Even Americans had an experience with something like *banzai* in the defence to the last man of Alamo Mission in 1836. Polish moviegoers remember the case of Michał Wołodyjowski and Hassling-Ketling of Elgin who blew themselves up in Kamieniec Podolski in 1672, which was described by Henryk Sienkiewicz in his famous novel *Pan Wołodyjowski* and shown in its adaptation for the screen by Jerzy Hoffman.

In Eastwood's movie, the acts of self-sacrifice are of great importance. As Robert Burgoyne writes, "Seen as an instance of testimony—a speech act—the suicides depicted in *Letters from Iwo Jima* can be associated with the 'letters' of the film's title. The film reframes the act in a way that emphasises the body of the soldier as a site of competing message, a text that exceeds its culturally sanctioned meanings in the coded discourses of war, becoming instead a site of self-authorship".<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Lars-Martin Sorensen, "East of Eastwood. Iwo Jima and the Japanese Context" [in:] Rikke Schubart & Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Eastwood's Iwo Jima. Critical Engagements with 'Flags of Our Fathers' and 'Letter from Iwo Jima'*, p. 197.

<sup>29</sup> Aaron Gerow, *From 'Flags of Our Fathers' to 'Letters from Iwo Jima': Clint Eastwood's Balancing of Japanese and American Perspective*.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Burgoyne, "Suicide in 'Letters from Iwo Jima'" [in:] Rikke Schubart & Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Eastwood's Iwo Jima. Critical Engagements with 'Flags of Our Fathers' and 'Letter from Iwo Jima'*, p. 232.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 232.

<sup>32</sup> The words credited to Elazar ben Yair, leader of Zealots defending the Jewish stronghold of Masada against Roman army in 73. See: Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus, the Learned and Authentic Jewish Historian*, translated by William Whiston, A.M., vol. II (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1845), s. 490.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Burgoyne, "Suicide in 'Letters from Iwo Jima'" [in:] Rikke Schubart & Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Eastwood's Iwo Jima. Critical Engagements with 'Flags of Our Fathers' and 'Letter from Iwo Jima'*, p. 232.

The first ritual suicide scene in *Letters from Iwo Jima* is demonstrative and moving. Let me once more quote Burgoyne: “The officer in charge ... decides to disobey General Kuribayashi’s order to retreat and orders his men to ‘die with honour’ ... Each soldier draws a grenade, struggles to fight back on overwhelming sense of fear and sorrow, and then blows himself up. The care, shown previously in the monochrome colours of pewter and charcoal, suddenly erupts into a sickening orange-red as the bodies of the soldiers burst open ... As the camera observes each soldier’s internal agony in extended psychological close-up, the powerful sense of identification and empathy that the collective suicides elicit is countered by an equally strong sense, underscored by the character’s behaviour, lighting and sound, of suicide as profoundly ‘Other’, as transgression, as taboo”.<sup>34</sup>

I would like to stress that, showing the scenes of honour deaths and *banzai*, Eastwood deprives individual and collective suicide of connotation with something barbarian, uncivilized, and primitive. While self-sacrifice is primarily motivated culturally, it is also a question of being true to oneself and to individual values, of loyalty to commanders and soldier fellows, and of inflexibility and courage. We may acknowledge those who commit suicide as victims of traditions, ideology, or upbringing. However, we may also acknowledge them as heroes because they are able to overcome fear, to give their life to a cause and to show extremely strong will.

As I have already mentioned, in *Letters from Iwo Jima* Eastwood tries to escape from stereotypical images of the Japanese and to refute the decades when the Americans demonized them as a result of the war on Pacific. Since Pearl Harbor, American films have built an extremely negative image of the Japanese as aliens, traitors, barbarians, and creatures unworthy of the name of human beings. They were accused of sadism, brutality, fanaticism, perversity, dishonesty, indecency, lack of dignity, and shortage of empathy, as well as of hatred and contempt for their enemies. What is very important is that these attributes belonged to almost all of the Japanese. “On American screens”, Wang Xiaofei notes, “Japanese soldiers were repeatedly shown torturing POWs, killing civilians, and raping Chinese women. Japanese soldiers laughed when they were killing (Ray Enright’s *Gung Ho! The True Story of Carlson’s Makin Island Raiders*, 1943), when they were raping Chinese women (John Farrow’s *China*, 1943, Harold S. Buckuet’s and Jack Conway’s *Dragon Seed*, 1944), or when they knew other soldiers had won a bloody battle (Lewis Milestone’s *The Purple Heart*, 1944). They smiled when they tried to ‘persuade’ American prisoners to speak (Edward Dmytryk’s *Behind the Rising Sun*, 1943 and *Purple Heart*). Japanese soldiers were also portrayed as sons of the jungle. They shot American soldiers in the back and they pretended to surrender only in order to kill GIs”.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 234.

<sup>35</sup> Wang Xiaofei, “Movies Without Mercy: Race, War, and Images of Japanese People in American Films, 1942-1945”, *Journal of American – East Asian Relations* 18 (2011), p. 18-19.

Kathryn Kane notices that in American combat films, Japanese soldiers were shown as nameless and faceless, not people who could think and act as individuals.<sup>36</sup> They were anonymous masses specially created to be killed by American heroes. If some Japanese survived, they would probably commit *seppuku* (this ritual was presented in Edwin S. Martin's *Invisible Agent*, 1942, in *Behind the Rising Sun*, *Purple Heart*, and in Frank Lloyd's *Blood on the Sand*, 1945). Sometimes the presence of Japanese soldiers was only suggested. Xiaofei quotes the excerpt from the program to Tay Garnett's *Bataan* (1943): "the Japs are totally impersonal; we don't even see the planes—only their bombs and bullets and the damage they do".<sup>37</sup>

Ian Buruma explains why we encounter faceless enemies in many combat films: "More war movies have been about heroes, and individual differences among the enemies were irrelevant, since their villainy could be taken for granted ... The whole point of feel-good propaganda is that the enemy has no personality; he is monolithic and thus inhuman".<sup>38</sup>

It is obvious that Eastwood does not use such a strategy in *Letters from Iwo Jima*. On the contrary, he individualizes his characters: Saigo, Kuribayashi, Nishi, Shimizu, and even Ito. We get to know a lot about their lives, families, likes and dislikes, and systems of values. They are human beings to the core. They have their distinctive features so that they are easily recognizable by the audience. They are no more "Others": they are like our friends and people around us.

The viewers find out a lot about the characters from flashbacks. Three of them belong to Kuribayashi (his visit to the United States as a military attaché), one to Saigo (call-up), and one to Shimizu (the incident with a pet dog and a Kempetai officer), and all are memories of a past prior to the war. They differ from the remaining fragments of the film in higher colour saturation; the scenes on Iwo Jima are almost drained of colour, restricting themselves to "an attenuated palette of pewter greys and pumice browns".<sup>39</sup>

The use of flashbacks allows viewers to get into the minds of characters and to come to know their thoughts, emotions, and way of reasoning. In building such images of the Japanese characters, Eastwood breaks and deconstructs the conventions of war and combat films (although to a lesser degree than in *Flags of Our Fathers*). This does not mean the director ignores and rejects the whole genre's tradition. *Letters of Iwo Jima* also preserves some of the fundamental tenets of combat movies. It follows the track of films such as Georg Wilhelm Pabst's *Westfront 1918: Vier von der Infanterie* (1930), Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the*

<sup>36</sup> Kathryn Kane, *Vision of War: Hollywood Combat Films of World War II* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), p. 56.

<sup>37</sup> Wang Xiaofei, *Movies Without Mercy: Race, War, and Images of Japanese People in American Films, 1942-1945*, "Journal of American – East Asian Relations" 18 (2011), p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Ian Buruma, "Eastwood War: The Battle of Iwo Jima", *Japan Focus*, 5, online: <http://www.apjff.org/-Ian-Buruma/2360/article.html> (accessed 28 July, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Leo Braudy, "Flags of Our Fathers / Letters of Iwo Jima", p. 17.

*Western Front* (1930), William A Wellman's *Bastogne* (1949), and Samuel Fuller's *The Steel Helmet* (1951), all works that are distinguishable by a high degree of realism. However, absolute realism is impossible as combat movies contain acts of violence. As Stephen Prince writes, "the cinema cannot present violence in other than a pleasure-inducing capacity ... The medium inevitably *aestheticizes* violence. The arousal and expression in cinema of 'negative' emotions—fear, anxiety, pain—typically occur as part of a pleasure-inducing aesthetic experience". The reason is simple: "It seems likely that representations of violence on screen that are unrelentingly horrifying, nauseating, or disgusting will fail to attract viewers".<sup>40</sup> Authentic images of combat violence are horrifying, nauseating, and disgusting.

Eastwood sets a high value on psychological realism. Sometimes, however, he abandons visual realism in favour of aesthetization of images that intensifies the film's influence. This is true, among others, of battle scenes and those presenting ritual suicides and *banzai*. I have already mentioned, quoting Robert Burgoyne, the sequence showing the first collective suicide. This fragment is tragic and startling but it is extraordinarily beautiful at the same time. The aesthetization of death, wounds, and blood gives the audience pleasure in seeing the film. If the viewers looked at those horrors in reality, they would never feel satisfaction. Most of them would probably have to close their eyes.

I believe *Letters from Iwo Jima* is an almost standard example of a transnational film, both on production and plot levels. However, it does not mean it is an absolute turning point in American-Japanese cinematographic relations. As we already know, during the Second World War and the next decade Hollywood directors portrayed the Japanese as brutal and barbarian villains representing a lower and more primitive human race. However, in the mid-1950s they began to hint, in movies like Daniel Mann's *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956) and Joshua Logan's *Sayonara* (1957), that the Japanese were not so alien and uncivilized. By the 1960s, even the war on Pacific was represented as more humane and noble. As Michael Paris writes, in Frank Sinatra's *None but the Brave* (1965) and John Boorman's *Hell in the Pacific* (1969), "it is even suggested that some Japanese soldiers were not very different from Americans".<sup>41</sup> Both films were American-Japanese co-productions, as was *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970) directed by Richard Fleischer, Kinji Fukasaku, and Toshio Masuda, which was "a detailed examination of the attack on Pearl Harbor, but told with remarkable fairness".<sup>42</sup> In subsequent years, a number of films appeared which were sympathetic to Japanese culture, tradition, and way of life. For example, movies such as Sydney Pollack's *The Yakuza* (1975) ("the first serious attempt of Western filmmakers to depict code-driven,

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Prince (ed.), *Screening violence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), pp. 27-28.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Paris, "'What Happened was Wrong!': 'Come See the Paradise' and the Japanese-American Experience in the Second World War" [in:] Michael Paris (ed.), *Repicturing the Second World War: Representations in Film and Television* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 113.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 113.

context-driven interactions between peoples in Japan”<sup>43</sup>), John G. Avildsen’s *The Karate Kid* (1984), Fran Rubel Kuzui’s *Tokyo Pop* (1988), Edward Zwick’s *The Last Samurai* (2003), Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* (2003), and Rob Marshall’s *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005).

However, *Letters from Iwo Jima* is an exceptional film. It is the only American combat movie made from a Japanese point of view and the only in which the author tries to understand and show respect to old Japanese customs and contemporary contradictions of Japanese *ego*. Eastwood reveals intense empathy towards the perfect cultural strangers who, by virtue of a government decision, became enemies of the United States. However, looking at somebody as at an enemy does not mean regarding him as a being deprived of humanity: a barbarian and a wild beast. Eastwood admits the very term “enemy” to be shady. Saigo, Shimizu, Kuribayashi, Nishi, and even Ito are not enemies. They are “trapped in a narrative of the primacy of patriotism, honour, and fate”<sup>44</sup> and led by cynical political leaders. Therefore, the true enemies are “politicians—the ones who are never seen in battle, but who willingly send soldiers off to die for a cause whose underlying rationale is virtually inscrutable”.<sup>45</sup> Japanese soldiers are victims, not perpetrators. They are to be pitied, not hated.

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<sup>43</sup> David H. Budd, *Culture Meets Culture in the Movies: An Analysis East, West, North and South, with Filmographies* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2002), p. 52.

<sup>44</sup> Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg, „Humanism versus Patriotism? Eastwood Trapped in the Bi-Polar Logic of Warfare” [in:] Rikke Schubart & Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Eastwood’s Iwo Jima. Critical Engagements with ‘Flags of Our Fathers’ and ‘Letter from Iwo Jima’*, p. 220.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p. 220.



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